

Deliberate Deception: The Truth Behind the Tonkin Gulf Resolution

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The Tonkin Gulf Resolution was passed in Congress following the August 1964 attacks on U.S. ships off the coast of North Vietnam. Allegedly, two separate unprovoked torpedo attacks by North Vietnamese aggressors led the Johnson administration to desire a resolution expressing the full support of Congress for a firm stance on Vietnam in responding to the attacks. The controversy surrounding the issue is this: the majority of Congressmen approved the resolution under the impression that it would not be used to authorize a wider war, whereas Johnson believed that their consent revealed a strong congressional commitment to his foreign strategy and subsequently used it as such. Because of this difference in interpretation, many Congressmen later felt intentionally misled. Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense under Kennedy and Johnson, believes that Johnson did not deliberately deceive Congress, and because Congress kept the language of the resolution vague, *they* were at fault. Mitchell Learner, in "Vietnam and the 1964 Election," agrees that Johnson did not deceive Congress because Johnson's actions and statements leading up to the resolution foreshadowed his intentions in Vietnam.

However, Joseph C. Goulden, in *Truth is the First Casualty*, strongly supports the idea that Johnson deceived Congress and manipulated the situation to his advantage. He believes that the reports of the August incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin were poorly investigated in an attempt to force Congress into signing the resolution. McNamara, in Goulden's estimation, is not a reliable witness regarding the passage of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution because he denies that he and Johnson consciously misled Congress in their encouragement of the resolution by shielding their desires to expand the war well before the resolution.

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First of all, plans for a more expansive war in Vietnam, including a large bombing program, were formed in early 1964. Furthermore, a contingency draft of the resolution was written and proposed months before the August incidents. And lastly, Johnson and McNamara, among others, explained the resolution ambiguously, which disguised their true intentions and encouraged differing interpretations among Congressmen.

A Clear Risk

Mitchell Lerner asserts that any historian blaming Johnson for intentionally deceiving Congress by pushing the resolution through Congress is wrong. He refers to many of the same Senate debates as Johnson does in his memoir, specifically this exchange between Senator Fulbright and Senator Cooper:

Senator Cooper: ... In other words, are we now giving the President advance authority to take whatever action he may deem necessary respecting South Vietnam and its defense, or with respect to the defense of any other country included in the treaty?

Senator Fulbright: I think that is correct.

Senator Cooper: Then, looking ahead, if the President decided that it was necessary to use such force as could lead into war, we will give that authority by this resolution?

Senator Fulbright: That is the way I would interpret it...

This conversation, Lerner argues, proves that the scope of the resolution was clear to Congress. Fulbright openly admitted that the resolution could authorize a wider war. Therefore, Congress was aware of this possibility when they passed it with overwhelming support. He goes on to state that Johnson made an honest attempt to make his intentions in Vietnam clear with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution before the November election but the electorate ignored him. Johnson's actions predating the

resolution displayed his early commitment to Vietnam and made his future intentions obvious. In addition to this, the strong disagreement of Senators Morse and Gruening, who believed the resolution was a “predated declaration of war,” was voiced loud and clear in the Senate. If these Senators made their argument clear, Congress must have known the stakes of the resolution when they voted. Johnson also testifies to this in his memoir, insisting that he established the capacity of it in his message to Congress. With evidence to reinforce the claim that Congressmen knew what they were getting into, it is difficult to believe that Johnson deliberately deceived Congress into signing the resolution. Given this, McNamara’s depiction of the situation has validity: Congress made an incorrect judgment of Johnson’s character, not the resolution.

Prior Plans for War

Evidence for bombing schemes as early as February 1964 prove that Johnson’s intentions in proposing the Tonkin Gulf Resolution seven months later were not as limited as he claimed, therefore he intentionally misled Congress in order to pass the resolution. At the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings in 1968, Fulbright thoroughly questioned McNamara on this topic. He referenced reports that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were pushing for a larger American presence in North Vietnam in early 1964. Following this, he explicitly asked if such plans had existed at all between early 1963 and July 1964, before the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was proposed. McNamara’s answer was: “I can’t recall. I will be very happy to check the record and put the proper answer in the record.” Later Fulbright received:

We have identified no such recommendation. A check of the records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is continuing.

The Defense Department as well as General Earle Wheeler both answered ambiguously when asked if recommendations had been made to extend the war in the North predating the resolution. Wheeler answered questioning with: “to the best of my knowledge and belief...

there was no thought of extending the war into the north.” All of these ambiguous responses were attempts to hide any intentions to extend the war prior to the resolution, which would prove that the resolution was intended to serve a larger purpose than McNamara and Johnson insisted at the time. That being so, their messages to Congress and the public regarding the resolution were blatant distortions of the truth.

Aside from these suspect comments, there is further information revealing that the administration had an expanded war in mind before the resolution. An article published in the *New York Times* by Hanson W. Baldwin in the summer of 1964 revealed that the Pentagon was already taking measures to strengthen the U.S. presence in Vietnam well before the attacks, including increased air support and Special Forces teams. More importantly, he states that Pentagon officials had been encouraging the installation of permanent guerrilla units in North Vietnam for quite some time. Neither McNamara nor Johnson mentioned this in their explanations and justifications of the resolution. Instead Johnson assured Congress that the U.S. approach to Vietnam would remain more or less the same, stressing that “our policy in Southeast Asia has been consistent and unchanged since 1954.” In addition, in a memorandum to Johnson in March of 1964, McNamara advised him about the future course of action in Vietnam. He outlined the need to prepare a quick response attack in case the conflict deteriorated in the near future. While he advocated for other solutions before the use of force, he admitted the situation was quickly souring, and added that putting “demonstrable retaliatory pressure on the North” may be soon necessary.

Given this evidence, it is almost certain that plans to expand the war in North Vietnam, or at the very least well-known indications of looming escalation, existed in early 1964. Thus, top officials in the Johnson administration were aware of the imminent escalation and McNamara and Johnson continued to advocate a limited interpretation of the resolution. In doing so, they consciously led Congress astray.

Early Draft of the Resolution

Proof that a preliminary draft of the resolution existed in early 1964 also verifies that Johnson's goal with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was beyond a response to the August attacks: he intended to back the extended campaign he foresaw. E.W. Kenworthy, writing for the *New York Times* in 1967, reported that a contingency draft had indeed existed well before the Tonkin incidents. Not only that: Johnson had been in the possession of this draft weeks before the attacks themselves. The contingency draft was a legislative resolution designed to broaden Johnson's freedom in dealing with Vietnam and gather bipartisan support before Walt Rostow suggested the election in February. This suggestion had the widespread support of Johnson's senior officials; a larger presence in Vietnam seemed necessary due to the continually deteriorating situation there. Johnson's National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy drafted a resolution in May ceding to Johnson the authority to use force to protect any country in Southeast Asia from the threat of communism at his discretion. The resolution was to be proposed in late June, and Bundy pushed an extensive promotional effort to gain substantial support for the bill. He even offered his suggested answers to the tough questions he anticipated from Congress. The resolution was fully prepared by early June, meaning the bombing targets were decided, the aircraft carriers were stationed, and the international explanations were drafted. But on June 15 all operations were called off and postponed; Johnson had suddenly decided against the plan on account of the intensity of the proposed attacks and his wariness of the November election. He didn't want to appear too eager for war at the risk of alienating the public (which was overwhelmingly against expanding the war). Bundy later denied that anyone other than himself had ever seen the contingency resolution, although the evidence to suggest otherwise is enough to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that a draft predating the resolution did indeed exist and was well-known throughout the higher levels of the administration. In response to inquiries during the 1968 Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing about the preliminary draft, McNamara replied, "I don't believe I ever saw it.... But I can't testify absolutely that I didn't."

This circuitous denial shows how eager McNamara was to conceal his suspicious role in passing the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

Knowing this, it's implied that McNamara and Johnson's intentions with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution were well beyond the authorization of a reprisal attack. Both must have been anticipating the impending escalation when proposing the resolution, otherwise there would have been no need for a backing from Congress supporting the growing conflict. Johnson himself touched upon this point in his examination of the motivation for the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. He believed that President Truman made a mistake by acting in South Korea without a resolution illustrating the support of Congress, and he intended to make sure that "Congress [went] in with [him]" in case they were forced to take further action. Johnson implies in this explanation that he had no indication that the war was headed toward escalation, yet top officials in the Johnson administration were well aware that further action had been looming on the horizon for months. To pretend as though he was completely blind to the possibilities of future escalation at the time of the resolution is entirely false, and constitutes deliberate deception. Because Johnson and McNamara were aware of the oncoming escalation at the time of the resolution, their alleged ignorance of the deteriorating situation is false. Therefore, McNamara's testimony of the passage regarding the resolution is simply incorrect.

Purposeful Ambiguity

The proceedings of the Senate debates regarding the resolution prove that the explanation of the resolution was purposely ambiguous and never explicitly tied down in an attempt to allow the future escalation high-ranking Johnson officials foresaw. Despite their broader intentions, the administration attempted to assure Congress that the resolution would not be used to expand the war. Senator Fulbright, floor leader for the resolution, was assured as such, and continually defended the limited nature of the resolution throughout the Senate debates. Fulbright used circuitous language in explaining the resolution, which left it open to future disagreements. When Senator Brewster asked whether or not this would allow Johnson to

deploy American soldiers to Vietnam, Fulbright responded, “[s]peaking for [the Senate Foreign Relations Committee], everyone I have heard has said that the last thing we want to do is to become involved in a land war in Asia.” This rhetoric is evasive; if this was the case, why wasn’t the language of the resolution changed to explicitly reflect the largely shared opinion in Congress that the war should be avoided at any cost? Senator Nelson proposed an amendment that did exactly that. The language of the amendment is as follows: “Our continuing policy is to limit our role to the provision of aid, training assistance, and military advice, and it is the sense of Congress that, except when provoked to a greater response, we should continue to attempt to avoid a direct military involvement in the Southeast Asian conflict.” Johnson had made it clear that he didn’t want any changes made to the resolution, so Fulbright threw out the amendment on the basis of efficiency and other muddled excuses, claiming that it would “delay matters” and “cause confusion.” The fact of the matter is that the Johnson administration couldn’t accept the amendment because it limited them to solely respond to the attacks in the Tonkin Gulf and they sought approval from Congress for future escalation. In response to Nelson’s request, Fulbright also added that “most members” of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee interpreted the resolution in that same limited sense. But the language was never tied down, so Johnson was left with the unilateral power to expand the war. Looking back, McNamara claimed that Congress was at fault for not clarifying the nature of the resolution. However, he fails to recognize the fact that Johnson rejected any active attempts Congressmen made to amend the resolution. Therefore, his interpretation of the situation is incorrect; Johnson, not Congress, was directly responsible for the ambiguity of the resolution. Johnson dismissed Congress’s efforts because he wanted the resolution to remain ambiguous in order to pursue his rapidly expanding agenda.

In his letter to the editor, Senator Nelson reassured the public that the resolution in no way authorized a wider war; this demonstrates that Congressmen felt very reassured by the statements of the Johnson administration that the resolution would not become a blank check for war. And they had every reason to be reassured; in Johnson’s message

to Congress accompanying the resolution, he states very clearly that the intention of the resolution is to make it clear to the international community that the U.S. will meet such attacks and “continue in its basic policy of assisting the free nations of the area to defend their freedom.” This strongly suggests that the resolution doesn’t mark a large change in the American approach to Vietnam. He goes on to say, “[As] I have repeatedly made clear, the United States intends no rashness, and seeks no wider war.” Here he is strongly implying that the resolution will not authorize any expansion. Secretary of State Dean Rusk also spoke strongly against any insinuations that the resolution would allow Johnson to expand the war at will by reiterating Johnson’s statement and reaffirming the U.S.’s limited and selfless ambitions. In addition, Fulbright’s comments during the Senate debates reaffirm that Congress was repeatedly assured that the resolution did not mark a drastic change in America’s policy in Vietnam. At one point he explicitly verified that “...the joint resolution is quite consistent with our existing mission...” in response to an inquiry from Senator Nelson. Clearly, the Johnson administration consciously kept their rhetoric limited in order to sway Congressmen who were wary of a larger commitment in Vietnam. However, Johnson and McNamara had prior knowledge of the likelihood of escalation and failed to make that clear to Congress for fear of losing votes in Congress. Consequently, they both knowingly manipulated Congress.

Lastly, Secretary Rusk and Johnson made arguments reaffirming the constitutionality of the resolution, hoping to persuade Congress by implying that the resolution did not exceed presidential powers. Rusk, in his statement to Congress, argues that it is widely accepted that the President has the authority to take “limited armed action in defense of American national interests” as Commander in Chief. Similarly, Johnson explicitly states upon signing the resolution that “[it] stands squarely within the four corners of the Constitution of the United States.” First of all, the fact that they defended its constitutionality in the first place calls into question the nature of their intentions. Moreover, by coupling the resolution with such a prestigious document they left Congress with the impression that it would be used in a very limited and just manner. This is a subtle attempt to sway Congress by shielding

the Pentagon's true intentions and disguising the extent of the power granted to the President in the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

McNamara also distracted Congress from the meaning of the resolution in his description of the August incidents in the Tonkin Gulf. He made sure that the focus remained primarily on the injustice of the attacks, revealing that he wished to disguise the open language of the resolution and inspire a patriotic response. He reassured them that the boats were simply carrying out "routine patrols" when they were viciously attacked by North Vietnamese torpedoes. However, information was released proving that American boats were fulfilling an undercover mission and were instructed to enter within the 12-mile boundary that North Vietnam had established. This is hardly routine. McNamara's description of the incidents to Congress was deliberately vague and oversimplified so that Congress would blindly approve an expansion of the war. While his actions during the passage of the resolution may not constitute a widespread conspiracy, the fact exists that McNamara participated, along with many other high-ranking officials in the Johnson administration, in a deliberate deception of Congress. McNamara's claims that Congress was at fault are groundless, and his testimony to the congressional events in August should be dismissed.

The passage of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution is similar to the Iraq Resolution passed under President Bush in 2002 in many ways. Senator Robert C. Byrd famously drew this parallel in his speech urging Congress to remember the consequences of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in considering the Iraq Resolution. He referred to the horrors of the Vietnam War and the deep regret felt by many Congressmen looking back on their rash actions. He went on to warn that Johnson had also inspired a patriotic response to attacks on the U.S. in order to pass his resolution. Above all, he implored Congress to wait for solid evidence of a threat to national security. However, the resolution passed based on the assumptions that Iraq fostered an active link to Al Qaeda and that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Both of these claims subsequently proved to be incorrect; again, Congress acted without concrete evidence. Because of this resolution, American troops remain in Iraq to this day. ●

Notes

1. Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 141.
2. Mitchell Lerner, "Vietnam and the 1964 Election: A Defense of Vietnam," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Fall, 1995): 751–766.
3. Joseph C. Goulden, *Truth Is the First Casualty: The Gulf of Tonkin Affair: Illusion and Reality* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969). Stanley Karnow, Ernest Gruening, and Herbert Beaser also agree with this argument. See also: Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983) and Ernest Gruening and Herbert Wilton Beaser, *Vietnam Folly* (Washington: National Press, 1968). For a succinct summary of this argument, see James P. Pfiffner, "The Contemporary Presidency: Presidential Lies," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (Dec. 1999): 903–917.
4. Lerner, "Vietnam and the 1964 Election."
5. *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 88th Congress*, [Permanent ed.], (Washington: Govt. Print. Off., 1965), 18409.
6. Lerner, "Vietnam and the 1964 Election," 760.
7. Ibid., 759.
8. Ibid.
9. *Congressional Record*, 18139.
10. Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963–1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 118.

11. John Galloway, *Fulbright and McNamara: An Investigation of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution* (Syracuse, New York: Inter-University Case Program, 1970), B-75.
12. Karnow, *Vietnam*, 375.
13. Hanson W. Baldwin, "Prescription for Vietnam," *The New York Times*, 1 July 1964, national edition, 8.
14. Lyndon B. Johnson, "President's Message to Congress, 5 August 1964," in *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking On Vietnam* [Senator Gravel ed.], (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 720. [Hereafter PP].
15. Robert S. McNamara to Lyndon B. Johnson, memorandum, 16 March 1964, in PP, 508.
16. E. W. Kenworthy, "Draft Resolutions Ready Before Tonkin Incidents," *The New York Times*, 22 Dec. 1967, national edition, 1.
17. Karnow, *Vietnam*, 358.
18. Ibid., 361.
19. Ibid., 362.
20. Ibid.
21. Galloway, *Fulbright and McNamara*, B-76.
22. Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 115.
23. McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 141.
24. Anthony Austin, *The President's War: The Story of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and How the Nation Was Trapped In Vietnam* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1971), 84.

25. Gaylord Nelson, "U.S. in Vietnam," *The New York Times*, 6 Oct. 1964, national edition, 38.
26. Ibid.
27. Goulden, *Truth is the First Casualty*, 75.
28. Ibid.
29. Nelson, "U.S. in Vietnam," 38.
30. Johnson, "Message to Congress," in PP, 721.
31. Ibid.
32. Dean Rusk, "Secretary Rusk's Full Statement," in Ezra Y. Siff, *Why the Senate Slept: The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and the Beginning of America's Vietnam War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 125.
33. *Congressional Record*, 18407.
34. Rusk, "Statement," in Siff, 126.
35. Lyndon B. Johnson, "President Johnson's Remarks of August 10, 1964, in Signing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution," in John Galloway, *The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), 179.
36. Secretary Rusk employed a similar strategy in his comparison between the Cuba Resolution and the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. By coupling the latter with a much more limited bill, he implies that the Tonkin Gulf Resolution doesn't grant the President the sole authority to expand the war. While this is a valid argument, the Cuba Resolution lies beyond the scope of this paper. See Siff, 129–132.
37. Robert S. McNamara, "Statement by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara," 6 August 1964, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing.

38. McNamara, "Statement," 7.

39. E. W. Kenworthy, "Morse Speaks in Senate," *The New York Times*, 22 Feb. 1968, national edition, 15. McNamara later admitted that the boats were ordered to do so in the February 20, 1968 Senate Foreign Relations Committee investigative hearings. See Galloway, *Fulbright and McNamara*, B-68.

40. Robert C. Byrd, "Speech of an Experienced Senator," (speech, Washington D.C., 10 Oct. 2002), Government Dirt, http://governmentdirt.com/robert_c_byrd_speech_of_an_experienced_senator.

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